Ode to Volunteers

They tend our garden...and they guide visitors through the Museum...and fold, sticker, stamp, stuff, and seal thousands of pieces of mail each year...and answer the door...and give our school tours...and serve on our Board.

They help catalogue and conserve our collections...and organize our archives...and make appraisals...and take photographs...and type, file, and help us unravel computer glitches.

At the Oyster Festival in October, they sell T-shirts and tickets...and answer questions about the Museum...and sweep the streets...and hang signs...and check ID's.

They do research...and give lectures and readings and performances and walking tours...and they build storage shelves...and straighten and price and sell in our shop.

They help organize events...and solicit donations...and staff our programs and parties, and clean up after...and bake for our teas...and design our invitations and stationery.

They are dedicated to preserving our unique 19th-century landmark building and its collections and communicating the story of the Merchant's House to New Yorkers and visitors from all over the world. Need we say more?

Executive Director

NoHo-A-GoGo
Here Comes the Night!

The Museum's sixth annual Garden Party Benefit, NoHo-A-GoGo, will be held on Ruby Tuesday, June 22, 6 to 9 p.m. NoHo-A-GoGo will celebrate our historic NoHo neighborhood 60's style—and war the non-critical funds for the Museum's public education programs and restoration of our 1832 building.

Only the Strong Survive...so we're Within and Hopin' you'll come. Call for your Tickets to Ride. (212) 777-1089. (We Ain't Too Proud to Beg.)

The Garden Issue
How Our Garden Grows—
An Interview with the Gardener

Over the last four years, we at the Merchant's House have watched in wonder as our back yard has been magically transformed into a lush garden. In the spring of 1995, John Rommel happened to pass by our door. In a recent interview, he told us the rest of the story.

Q. How did you become aware of the Merchant's House back yard?
A. I'd lived in the neighborhood for 20 years, and one day as I was passing by the Merchant's House, the door was open and I realized that this was a good opportunity for me to see this house. I always wondered about it. When I looked out the back window, I saw a garden that needed attention. Right then I decided to offer my services as a volunteer, and the next day, submitted a proposal, which was basically a maintenance plan. Obviously, we've gone beyond that.

Q. Were you already a gardener when you began working in the Merchant's House garden?
A. Yes, I've been gardening for 15 years now. I work with a community garden at Avenue B and Sixth Street and I tend a garden in Queens for my mother.

Q. Would you characterize your garden as a typical 19th-century garden?
A. The garden is sympathetic to the garden style of the 19th century. It's a very formal garden, very symmetrical. We employ an example of earlier 19th-century carpet bedding in a strip border along the back parterre area. The perennial border along the sides of the garden is typical of the later style of 19th-century gardening popularized by Gertrude Jekyll. Along the back of the garden in the dry wall, we've planted a rockery. Rock gardening was popular in the 19th century as well.

Q. What is it about gardening that attracts you?
A. It's like painting; it's an open canvas. You get to direct the eye and create form. If you don't like where the yellow is, you just dig it up and move it. The unique quality of the Merchant's House garden is that it's public space, yet it's a very private space—a secret space. You can create a very intimate garden here. I think the intimacy of this garden is what draws me to it. It's a garden for people to relax in.

Q. How large a crew do you have to help you?
A. There's Zabel Meshberg, who does the rockery; Delphine Oravetz, whose specialty is working with perennial plant matter and mood; and Gaster Hoffmang, who is British and provides quality control for our Sunday teas, in spite of their authenticity. She also works in the garden. Peter Anthony also volunteers as a gardener and Phyllis Bannick helps with the teas. The teas are very important because they raise funds for the garden.

Q. Do you have a wish list for the garden? What would you like to accomplish in the future?
A. I'd like to have a cast iron bench and table for the shady corner of the garden. Eventually, I'd like to replace the chain link fence at the back, which is now covered with Boston ivy and Virginia creeper, with a back wall that would be more interesting architecturally. And I'd like to explore the possibility of opening the garden for other garden groups to come and use for programs.

Q. So, you're pleased with your efforts here so far?
I'm very happy with what we've done here. I'm pleased that both Stuart and I are enjoying the space. I'm satisfied with our efforts: But we're constantly tweaking things, making sure plants are well positioned and fulfilling our visual needs. A garden is never finished.

See the Merchant's House garden featured in the recently published Gardens in the City: New York in Bloom, by Mary Jane Pool with photographs by Betsy Pinover Schiff

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact—inside and out—from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City Landmark, the house was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years. It is the City's prime example of a Greek Revival home.

Open Sunday through Thursday, 1 to 4 p.m. Admission $5, seniors and students $3.
Summer Exhibit: Fans and Laces from the Collection

Second Sunday Teas
In the Garden
Proceeds benefit the Garden Fund. $35 per couple. Reservations (212) 777-1089. Seatings at 2 and 3 p.m.

Sunday, June 13
Victorian Faerie Tea A light-hearted event featuring butterfly cookies, finger sandwiches, and desserts.

Sunday, July 11
Americana Tea A red, white, and blue collation celebrating American independence.

Sunday, August 8
Summer Days Tea Iced tea, iced cookies, and other cool desserts will be served.

Tour the Old Dominion
This Fall, October 20-24
Visit 18th-century plantations along the James River, see a Palladian villa near Charlottesville, and stop for lunch at a former plantation designed by Thomas Jefferson on this tour of the Old Dominion sponsored by Classical America and the Merchant’s House Museum. For information and brochure, call Thomas Hayes (413) 528-9992.

Life in the Past Lane—
The 19th-Century Back Yard
Little documentary evidence exists to tell us what the urban back yard of the 19th-century rowhouse looked like. Of one thing, however, we can be sure. During the Tredwell’s residency at 29 East Fourth Street, practical imperatives meant that the back yard was primarily a utilitarian space.

There was, of course, the need for a privy, which would have been located at the rear corner of the yard, as far away from the house as possible. A path from the house would have led to the privy and to the gate at the rear permitting tradesmen to make deliveries from the alley.

Laundry posts to which clotheslines were attached would have been located along the sides of the yard. In addition to hanging the laundry, the servants probably escaped the steamy kitchen to perform whatever kitchen chores they could outside. The yard also would have served as an outdoor play space for the Tredwell children.

In the 19th century, back yards were not enclosed but were separated by low fences. Most of the yard was probably grass, and the perimeter may have been planted with flowers.

While we can’t be sure what it looked like, our back yard garden in the 19th century was undoubtedly a far cry from the serene haven it is today.